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Special Issue

Hillsdale College and *Imprimis*

Arlan K. Gilbert

Hillsdale College Historian



ARLAN K. GILBERT was a member of the History Department at Hillsdale College for 38 years. He served a decade as department chairman and was elected Professor of the Year in 1984. He served seven years as senior faculty member, and his awards include the Alumni Association's Honorary Alumnus in 1992 and the Charger Award for his contributions to athletics. During the College's sesquicentennial, he was presented with an honorary doctor of philosophy degree. He is also a member of Hillsdale's President's Club, which recognizes outstanding supporters of the College. He has written four books on the history of Hillsdale College, most recently *Ransom Dunn: Hillsdale's Grand Old Man* (Hillsdale College Press, 2007).

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This month we are introducing a new look for Imprimis—the fifth Imprimis redesign in its 35-year history. We thought we would take the opportunity upon doing so to ask Hillsdale College Historian Arlan Gilbert to write a brief history of the College and of Imprimis.*

Hillsdale College was founded as Michigan Central College in Spring Arbor, Michigan, and began classes in December 1844. The College moved to Hillsdale and assumed its current name in 1853. Its original financial support was secured by Ransom Dunn, a preacher and professor of moral theology, who raised thousands of small donations for the College during the early 1850s by riding 6,000 miles on horseback through the Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota frontiers. His theme was the importance of education in a republic—a theme reflected in the Preamble to Hillsdale's Articles of Association, which states that the College undertakes its work "...grateful to God for the inestimable blessings resulting from the prevalence of civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety in the land, and believing that the diffusion of sound learning is essential to the perpetuity of these blessings" This old and noble passage is read at the beginning of every Hillsdale Board of Trustees meeting even today.

Although established by Freewill Baptists, Hillsdale College has been officially non-denominational since its inception. One of only 119 American colleges awarding four-year liberal arts degrees in 1850, Hillsdale was the first American college to prohibit in its charter all discrimi-

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nation based on race, religion or sex. Those who founded it shared a deep devotion to the first principles of America as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the Constitution.

In keeping with this devotion, Hillsdale became an early force for the abolition of slavery and several of its professors were involved in founding the new Republican Party in Jackson, Michigan, on July 6, 1854. During the antebellum and Civil War years, the College became a stopping place for such leading anti-slavery speakers as Frederick Douglass, Edward Everett, Senators Charles Sumner and Lyman Trumbull, Carl Schurz, Owen Lovejoy and William Lloyd Garrison. And except for the military academies, no college or university sent a greater proportion of its young men to fight for the Union. Of the more than 400 Hillsdale men who served in the Civil War, half became officers, four won the Medal of Honor, three became generals and many more served as regimental commanders. Sixty died.

For almost three-and-a-half decades after the war, Ransom Dunn continued to teach and serve in a leadership role at the College, and he is chiefly responsible for the fact that Hillsdale would survive while over 80 percent of colleges founded before the Civil War would fail.

Challenge to Hillsdale's Independence

The second great crisis in Hillsdale's history began in the late 1950s, when the federal government—following the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957—made its first experiments in funding and regulating higher education. By 1962, Hillsdale College president J. Donald Phillips and the College's Board of Trustees were faced with deciding whether to accept federal aid along with their competitors or take a stand for independence that would place them at a great financial disadvantage. They took the latter course, issuing a "Declaration of Independence" that read in part as follows:

The thousands of young men and young women who have studied here have been taught some fundamental truths; among these is that the freedom guaranteed them as citizens of this great country is the freedom to dream and aspire without limit and the freedom to fulfill their dreams and aspirations without interfer-

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ence; that our country's greatness is the result not of government benevolence but rather of individual initiative and enterprise; and that responsibility is the counterpart of independence.

We hold these views to be as valid today as they were in 1844 despite the appearance and growth of a contrary philosophy based on government paternalism.

It is our conviction that this contrary philosophy is negatory to the traditional beliefs and teachings of Hillsdale College and is to be deplored as harmful to the continued development of our country, both morally and economically.

It is therefore the decision of the Board of Trustees of Hillsdale College to reaffirm its historic independence and to resist subsidization of its affairs by the federal government. Acknowledging that the possibility of failure is a concomitant of independence, the Trustees place their trust in God and in the dedication and generosity of students, alumni and friends who share their views.

This resolution reflected Hillsdale's policy since its inception. But during the 1960s and early '70s, some of Hillsdale's students began accepting federal student loans and taking advantage of the G.I. Bill, and in the mid-1970s, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare determined that this was sufficient grounds to impose federal regulations on Hillsdale. Among other things, these regulations would have forced the College to begin counting its students and faculty according to race and gender. At this time the College's president was George C. Roche, and he

and the Board of Trustees reacted as strongly as their predecessors by issuing two toughly-worded resolutions: One, the College would continue its policy of non-discrimination. Two, the College, "with the help of God," would "resist, by all legal means, any encroachments on its independence."

In 1979, this battle with what was now the Department of Education intensified. Hillsdale College filed a petition for judicial review in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati. In 1984, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled upon the issue, and Hillsdale's position was declared invalid. But rather than knuckle under, the College decided to tell its students that they could no longer bring even one dollar of federal taxpayer subsidies to Hillsdale, and vowed to replace that student aid with voluntary contributions from alumni and friends. Originally this policy required the College to raise an additional \$1 million annually from private sources. Today, with the continuing growth of federal spending on higher education, this figure stands at over \$5 million per year.

With its stand for independence, Hillsdale again attained a national reputation. As the *Detroit News* wrote in 1981, "Hillsdale. . . is

famous as the little college that fights for rightness and independence. From the unlikely location of south central Michigan, it gained its national recognition by drawing its sword against the federal government. No trespassing, it told HEW; we'll hire, promote, subsidize, educate and influence with no interference from you." More importantly, in subsequent decades Hillsdale has continued to carry out its original mission. Indeed, it has thrived in doing so and stands as an example to the nation that independence *works*.

The Hillsdale College Board of Trustees most recently restated its vow to keep Hillsdale independent on October 17, 2003, passing by a unanimous vote the following resolution:

Imprimis (im-pri-mis),
[Latin]: in the first place

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The Board of Trustees and Administration of Hillsdale College have been entrusted with, and are determined to uphold, the original and great principles and mission of the College as set down nearly 160 years ago by its founders.

Those principles and that mission require the College to provide “sound learning” to all willing students, and to do so in a way that perpetuates “the blessings of civil and religious liberty” and “intelligent piety” in the land.

The entanglement of the federal government in the financing of colleges and universities, and the consequent regulation of these institutions by federal agencies, violate the idea of limited government embodied in the Constitution.

Such violations are inherently corrupt, as seen in attempts by the Department of Education to force Hillsdale College to count its students by race, in direct violation of the noblest principles of the College and of America.

Hillsdale College will continue zealously to defend and uphold, against all threats and inducements, its independence from federal government regulation; and the Administration of Hillsdale College, with the support of the Board of Trustees, will continue to provide not only the finest liberal arts education, but also national leadership in promoting the principles of liberty across the land, and it will pursue these aims in strict avoidance of all subsidy from the federal taxpayer.

This resolution was published on a full page of the *New York Times* on December 3, 2003.

Today, more than ever in modern times, Hillsdale College adheres to the mission stated in the preamble of its founding document. Every student who enters the College signs an honor code derived from that document. Both applications and academic standards have reached a peak and are trending still upwards. The College is nine-tenths of the way to meeting its goal in a \$400 million capital and endowment campaign, called the Founders

Campaign. Boasting already a new music building and two new classroom and office buildings, construction is under way on a new student center and a significant addition to the science center. The campus has never been lovelier or more active.

Hillsdale College is proud of its legacy. It understands that it will face battles for preservation in the future, given that both government and many of its competitors today hold to different principles and move in different directions. But it is strong, and it is determined to be of service in reversing these trends.

Extending Hillsdale’s Mission: *Imprimis*

The College’s national speech digest *Imprimis* was founded under the leadership of President Roche in 1972. Twenty years later, he looked back to its beginning, and marveled at the growth it had achieved to that point:

[I]t was Nobel economist and long-time Hillsdale friend F.A. Hayek who said, “We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure” In its own way, Hillsdale College has taken Hayek’s message to heart. That is why *Imprimis* was created. . . to publish, in a lively and entertaining format, some of the lectures presented in the College’s unique on- and off-campus forums. Meaning “in the first place,” *Imprimis* was first sent to a little over a thousand friends with the message, “If you like this, share it. We’ll give anyone interested a lifetime free subscription—no strings attached.”

And how it has grown! As I write, our circulation is 335,000; [soon] that figure will be obsolete. We are growing at a phenomenal rate. In a few years, we hope to reach a half-million readers every month. For a journal of opinion like *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, *National Review* or the *New Republic*, that kind of circulation would be outstanding; *Imprimis* is, in fact, already far larger than all of these. For a rural liberal arts college with a mere 1,200 or so students, it would be, in short, a miracle. Anyone familiar with this little school’s nearly

150-year past knows, however, that miracles are our specialty.

In the 15 years since then—last month marked 35 years since the first issue, which contained a speech by free-market economist Henry Hazlitt called “The Dangers of Price Controls”—the circulation of *Imprimis* has grown to exceed 1.25 million.

The quality of Hillsdale speakers who have been published in *Imprimis* is as impressive as these numbers. One could mention only Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and stop there. But there are others: statesmen such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Clarence Thomas; businessmen like Dave Thomas and Steve Forbes; Nobel economists such as Milton Friedman and James Buchanan; historians of the prominence of David McCullough and Victor Davis Hanson; leading journalists like Brit Hume and George Will; and cultural critics of the note of Charlton Heston and Michael Medved. But even more important, the message of *Imprimis* has remained constant, as it has promoted the ideas of limited government, individual rights, personal responsibility, free-market economics, and a strong national defense.

People often ask about Hillsdale's reasons for sending *Imprimis* free of charge to so many people each and every month. There are two main answers to this question, each of them connected to the unique history of the College recounted above.

The first is connected to Hillsdale's recent history. To remain independent in the face of the federal government's considerable efforts to centralize control of higher education, Hillsdale College needs many friends. And *Imprimis* has proven, through the years, to be an effective vehicle for making them.

The second is connected to Hillsdale's older



During its 35-year history, Imprimis has undergone several changes in design, while remaining devoted to its original purpose: extending the mission of Hillsdale College to a national audience.

history. Its earliest founding document contained the idea of the College's duty to the nation. This idea has remained strong at Hillsdale, even as other colleges and universities have fallen prey to doctrines of moral and cultural relativism, “diversity” and multiculturalism. *Imprimis* is a means of serving that idea by extending Hillsdale's educational mission to a national audience.

Maintaining the College's independence, then, is part and parcel of fulfilling Hillsdale's mission by expounding the ideas that are necessary to preserve—and, when necessary, revive—the principles and institutions of free government. The fact that these ideas are under fierce assault from almost every other quarter in academia makes *Imprimis* all the more important to maintain. Indeed, efforts are under way to increase its circulation and its influence ever further as it heads toward its fifth decade of publication.

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The official Hillsdale motto is “Virtus tentamine gaudet,” which translates “Strength rejoices in the challenge.” And every entering freshman at Hillsdale College agrees to and signs an honor code which reads in part: “A Hillsdale College student is honorable in conduct, honest in word and deed, dutiful in study and service, and respectful of the rights of others. Through education the student rises to self-government.”

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